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When the Government of the Republic of Serbia decided to introduce religious education into state schools in 2001, Serbia joined along its neighboring countries, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where, at the request of the dominant religious communities, confessional religious education had been part of the curricula ever since 1991, i.e. since the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. In Serbia, religious education was introduced under chaotic circumstances, shortly after the democratic changes following October 5th, 2000, to which it was directly linked. The previous regime of Slobodan Milošević had rejected all initiatives seeking the introduction of religious education into state schools, in spite of the numerous concessions and policy changes toward the Church, compared with the period of the Socialist Federal Yugoslavia. The democratic government, personified by its leader Zoran Djindjic, resorted to religious education, confronted with the numerous challenges of transition and also with the newly created ideological vacuum and the need to sober up from the nationalism that had marked Serbia in the nineties. After the vehement reactions provoked by this decision, its effects and consequences have not been the subject of any serious analyses. Thus, this paper is a pioneer venture in this direction.

In the introductory part, a survey of the public debate that accompanied the introduction of religious education in Serbia is presented. It is followed by an analysis of the underpinning legislature and of the regulations governing this field. The empirical part of the study looks into numerous components of religious education, from the curricula and syllabi, textbooks and the teachers' professional competence to practical problems related to the implementation of the program in the schools, the (lack of) interest on behalf of the students and the indirect discrimination provoked by the introduction of religious education. Particular attention is paid to the "rivalry" between religious education and the other optional subject – civic education, this posing the gravest structural problem ensuing from the introduction of these two subjects. The educational reform that took place last year in Serbia has left the model and the status of religious education in Serbia unchanged, and in deep discrepancy with the changes that religious education is undergoing in other European countries, which have been briefly outlined. Finally, recommendations are given as to how to improve religious education in Serbia within the existing legal framework, relying on the experience of other countries and the advances that have been achieved in religious pedagogy and didactics, as well as in the understanding of the importance and the role of religious education in the schools.

The introduction of religious education

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) was the proponent of the initiative to introduce religious education into state schools. The demand for its confessional character was explained by the attitude that "there is no such thing as a general concept, let alone a universal religion – we can have a religious experience exclusively within a specific religion and a specific denomination." The right to religious education was derived from and based on the right to education, the right to choose one's perspective of the world, the right to religious practice and the parents' rights to bring up their children in accordance with their religious beliefs, which are all provided for by international conventions. In this process, the existence of religious education in other European countries was being emphasized, yet, by insisting on the confessional model, a whole range of other solutions and experiences existing in those countries was disregarded. The need for the introduction of religious education was also emphasized because of the omnipresent and

increasing crime rate, domestic violence and the alleged appearance and spreading of so-called destructive sects. As in other ex-socialist countries, the dominant argument on behalf of religious education was its undemocratic abolition by the communist authorities after World War Two. Radomir V. Popovic, professor of the Theological Faculty, even thinks that it was a matter of "mutual conspiracy and understanding" of the communist commissaries and the sham democracies of Western Europe and America with the aim to "promulgate spiritual devastation and void, predominantly in Orthodox countries."

The opinions of certain believers and priests of SPC that a Christian can be formed only through the confession of faith, participation in church life through religious services, the confession of sins and holy communion and that the Church should not rely on the secular state and its educational system to implement its pastoral activities and spiritual mission, were outnumbered. According to this standpoint, the priest and monks ought to conduct their activities through pastoral work in the Church itself, just as religious parents ought to ensure a Christian upbringing for their children by addressing the Church, and not the secular school, the ministries and similar institutions. In spite of experiences that children should not be coerced into any kind of such education, the opinion about obligatory religious education prevailed, i.e. about a mandatory option between religious education and its alternative subject. Unlike the Catholic Church in Croatia, SPC and other religious communities in Serbia advocated the opinion that the children who opt against attending religious education classes should be offered an alternative subject, related to ethics that should be designed by educational experts. Nevertheless, SPC disputed the optional character of the subject on the grounds that the children are unable to make independent decisions about their syllabi and that they would not attend classes in other subjects if they were optional. In view of the fact that religious education is a new and unfamiliar area, both for the students and for their parents, the majority Church rejected surveys as a way of assessing public opinion, because assuming an attitude about an unfamiliar subject was considered "not valid and incompetent", thus professing church and state monopoly in deciding this matter.

On the other hand, numerous non-governmental organizations and educational experts warned that the manner in which religious education was being introduced into state schools was against the Constitution of the country and the adopted procedures and standards concerning the introduction of new subjects into the curriculum, which require a two-year experimental application, followed by an expert analysis. The Board for the right to education free of religious and political indoctrination of the Association of teachers, associates and researchers of Novi Sad University led the campaign against the introduction of religious education, with ninety non-governmental organizations joining in their activities and supporting their proclamations. Joining in the opposition to the introduction of religious teachings into state schools were also the Council of Belgrade University, all the rectors and numerous university professors in Serbia, The Educational Forum, The Association of Pedagogic Societies of Yugoslavia and other expert organizations that deal with education. Opponents of religious education pointed to the fact that, in the Balkans, religions have been a disuniting factor and that the division into confessional religious education programs means supporting isolation, reinforcing ethnic divisions and creating obstacles to social cohesion –pledging for the idea of teaching religion, its universal values, its importance in the existence of a society and of the individual and its influence on historical developments and art in a way that would create a favorable environment for bringing the children of different confessions closer together. The SPC categorically denied the possibility of discrimination of children on confessional bases, whereas their very defense occasionally contained discriminatory language. Pointing at concrete examples of the contents of the

publications and models of upbringing professed by SPC, warnings were issued about their discrimination against women, which threatened to enter state schools along with religious education. At the same time, in SPC publications, even the introduction of religious education was argued for using discriminatory attitudes toward women.

Some critics focused on the very reasons for the introduction of religious education, like professor Ljubiša Rajic, for example, arguing that Serbian schools are in such a sorry state, with classes being attended in two or even three shifts, with up to 50 students per class, without teaching equipment and with insufficiently trained teaching staff, that the introduction of religious education indicated a deliberate attempt to avoid tackling the existing problems, which would be a continuation of the practice of the previous regime. Professor Ivan Ivic articulated the most far-reaching doubts about the introduction of religious education in Serbia, based on his 35 years of experience in education in Serbia. Considering that education in Serbia is inefficient, undemocratic, and unable to establish certain values and pointing to the fact that the post-modern culture of the young rejects all the big systems and values, Ivic warned of the fact that religious education would either be completely ineffective or that the effects would be negative. Even the Minister of Culture, Gašo Knežević, pledged for postponing the introduction of religious education for one year, until 2002/2003, in order to prepare competent teaching staff and appropriate materials, whereas the interim period would be used to test various options, so as to avoid problems such as those that occurred after the hasty introduction of religious education in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The debate regarding the justifiability and character of religious education did not prevent the authorities from undertaking concrete steps towards the introduction of religious teachings into schools. In March 2001, The Board for Education of the Assembly of Serbia demanded that religious education be introduced in the curriculum as a regular subject. A few months later, following talks with the SPC Holy Synod, the late Prime Minister Zoran Đindić held talks with the representatives of six more religious communities, on July 5th, and announced the introduction of religious teachings into state schools as of September. By government decree, these seven religious communities were proclaimed traditional, thus obtaining the right to religious education in state schools, financed by the state. A state commission for religious education was set up, consisting of representatives of the religious communities that had been made official as traditional communities and representatives of the ministry of Education and Religions, who were authorized to conceive, apply and supervise religious education. The Ministry of Education was given the task of preparing an alternative subject, which, at that time, had neither a name nor a clearly defined role and content.

The selection of only seven religious communities authorized to implement religious education in state schools sets a precedent, because the previous law did not discriminate between different religious communities. The legal draft on religious communities that proposed similar division on traditional and nontraditional religious communities was earlier refuted due to numerous objections. Small religious communities were particularly affected by this exclusion at the time when a fierce public campaign was under way against their practices, which resulted in numerous physical attacks aimed at their facilities and representatives. Moreover, one traditional church, The Romanian Orthodox Church (RPC), which practices officially in the area of Banat, was not included in the seven recognized religious communities. The illegal exclusion of this Church acquires a new dimension in view of the fact that its members belong to the Romanian ethnic minority, whose children are legally entitled to education in their mother tongue, therefore also to religious education adhering to the state educational system. The reason for this exclusion

is the conflict between the SPC and the RPC that broke out after the RPC appointed its bishop in Vršac, alongside the SPC bishop. In turn, the SPC broke off all previous sisterly relations with the RPC, while the RPC was denied the right to implement religious education, by state decrees. Among other denominations that have been left out of the list of traditional religious communities are the Christian Adventist Church, which is entitled to religious education in Austria, as well as in neighboring Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, provided it is desired and practically feasible, i.e. if there are a sufficient number of students.

The introduction of the alternative optional subject to religious education, which is supposed to promote civic society values such as democracy, human rights, and tolerance, also came under harsh criticism; primarily because the new subject, which was later named civic education, was being introduced hastily and with no previous public debate. The Belgrade Center for Human Rights declared that a choice between the two implies that the attendance of religious education means the absence of belief in democracy, human rights and tolerance. For all these reasons, the opponents of the introduction of religious education called for a boycott of both these newly introduced subjects.

In September 2001, the Ministry of Religions published the brochure "Religious Education in Serbia", with the aim of presenting the newly introduced subject and to help the students and their parents decide between the two optional subjects, i.e. religious education and the alternative subject. "The reinstatement of religious education" was accounted for by the parents' right to "provide their children with an upbringing in accordance with their own religious beliefs", that derives from the right to freedom of religion and the 1990 UN Convention on Children's Rights. The brochure emphasizes that religious education is a natural and indispensable part of the educational system in practically all democratic countries and that research has revealed that more than 87% of the citizens are religious, with 82% of secondary school students wishing to attend religious education classes. The basic goals and contents of religious education are briefly outlined, with a special emphasis on the idea that "there is no conflict between science and faith, as nearly 90% of scientists are religious." Such argumentation came under severe criticism, mostly concerning figures and percentages it abounds in. Sociologists warned that data on confessional affiliation does not imply the respondents' religious feelings. The percentages referring to secondary school students and to religious scientists were assessed as unrealistic and compared to the results of the Center for study of alternatives in Belgrade that reveal that the citizens' opinions on religious education are mixed and inconsistent and that, with considerable generalization, the conclusion could be drawn that one-third of citizens are in favor of the introduction of religious education, one-third are against it and the remaining third are either undecided or uninformed. Ljubiša Rajic and Laslo Sekelj denied the implication about the right to religious education in state schools based on the right to freedom of religion and the International Convention on Children's Rights, because these documents are not binding for the state to introduce religious education in its schools and, actually, insist on the protection of the children from influences encouraging religious or any other kind of divisions. According to their interpretation of these international conventions, the only obligation of the state is to ensure free religious education, i.e. to not impede it.

After the results that revealed a relatively low turnout in the first poll in September 2001, in a protest that the Holy Synod of Orthodox Bishops lodged against the Republic Minister of Education, the officials of this Ministry and the school authorities were accused of "having taken advantage of their positions and, contrary to all the previously achieved agreements, and to the basic democratic principle of equal treatment of religious education and the alternative subject of

civic education, of conducting an orchestrated campaign against religious education and oppression of the parents and students in favor of this education." The bishops of the Catholic Church in Serbia joined in this protest, accusing the school authorities of discrimination against Catholics and propaganda against religious education. However, apart from sporadic cases of misunderstandings in the schools, the opting procedure in the schools could hardly justify expressions such as orchestrated campaign or oppression. Clearly, the Ministry of Education manifested resistance to the model that had been imposed by political decision and had failed to consult the experts and educational institutions. The results of a survey conducted among elementary school teachers also testify that the majority of the teaching staff thought that confessional religious education ought to be replaced by a different model of religious education.

Governing legislature in the area of religious education

According to the legal acts adopted in the course of the same year, religious teachers in secondary schools are required to have completed high theological education (to have graduated from the University of Theology), whereas those teaching in elementary schools are required to have completed theological education of a higher level. Schoolteachers with additional theological training are also allowed to instruct religious education. The training criteria were not specified, which leads to the conclusion that they are set by the churches. The Ministry of Education adopted this proposal and published a list of teachers of religious education. According to this list, religious education in Serbia is implemented by 1,500 teachers, with 1,200 teachers teaching Orthodox catechism, more than 200 teaching Catholic religious instruction, 50 the religious instruction of the Slovakian Evangelical church, 40 the religious instruction – ilmudin– of the Islamic religious community, 19 the religious education of the Reformed Church, 5 of the Evangelical Church and one person trained for the religious instruction of the Jewish community. According to the law, religious teachers sign an annual contract with the school in which they work, granting them equal labor rights with the teachers of other subjects, while the time limit of the contract leaves the possibility to the churches to influence the choice of religious teachers and to replace those they deem unfit. The contract assures that the religious teachers have the same rights and obligations regarding the school's regular activities. The school pedagogues and the authorized representative of the religious community are entitled to visit classes. Attendance records are kept in the same way as for the other subjects. The criteria for descriptive marks have also been set: with distinction, good and satisfactory. These marks are entered in class registers and student's reports, but do not influence their average grade. Optional activities and supplementary activities are also allowed, as well as the use of specific teaching materials that the schools are due to provide for the teachers.

This legal framework also contained the syllabi for religious education for the first year of elementary and secondary schools of all the confessions the government decree applied to. The syllabus contains the objectives, tasks and contents of religious education and the manner of implementation of the program, i.e. a brief set of instructions. These programs were entirely designed by the religious communities, without the participation of experts of pedagogic orientation or of experienced teachers. There are no major differences between the objectives and tasks among the different confessions, but rather in the contents and sophistication of their production and presentation. They have already been subject to the critical analyses of the expert public that pointed to the disregard of didactic and methodical principles, terminological imprecision and inadequacy for the students' age.

In addition to these essential documents, so far the Ministry of Education has not received any analysis or research of the effects and results of religious education, in spite of the fact that it has

been over two years since it was introduced into the elementary and secondary schools. Only occasionally do some findings or information about sporadic problems appear in the press. The representatives of the religious communities did not accept a proposal for conducting a common evaluation of religious education and civic education under the auspices of UNESCO, UNICEF and the Open Society Fund. The explanation was that it was too early for such an evaluation, especially if this job is given to experts from abroad, although the instruments, data processing and the organization of the research on the national sample were effectuated by the domestic agency *Strategic Marketing* from Belgrade. Due to the refusal of the religious communities to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of religious education on the national sample and the passive attitude of the Ministry of Religions and the Ministry of Education, the author was forced to resort to the ethnographic method of data collecting for the sake of this research. This analysis is based on insight and information acquired by visiting religious education classes in 15 schools throughout Serbia and on discussions with several dozen religious teachers, representatives of the most numerous confessions, school principals, officials of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religions, teachers, parents and students. The governing principle in the selection of the schools was one of purposive sample, therefore, visits were made to urban and rural schools, schools in religiously homogenous and multi-confessional environments, schools with a few dozen students and those with a couple of thousand, both elementary and secondary, grammar schools and vocational schools, etc. The observations that follow are based on the research sample and apply exclusively to religious education, although they need to be placed in the larger context of the Serbian educational system, which, on the threshold of reform, confronts a host of ideological dilemmas and is suffering severely from unsolved financial and personnel problems.

Perspectives on religious education in practice

The common denominator of all the opinions obtained in the course of this research – from teachers, religious teachers and other interested observers – is the conclusion that religious education was introduced into the school syllabi too hastily. The status of religious education was decided at the eleventh hour, whereas the plans and programs arrived much latter after religious education had already begun as a new school subject. The school principals were desperate for not having received any more detailed instructions, apart from the government decree. The secondary schools, which notoriously suffer from lack of space, were not able to solve the problem of timetables and implementation of the teaching schedules.

Priest Josip Temunovic from Subotica believes that religious education was launched without the necessary preparation, without trained teachers and in a school system that had previously been criticized as inadequate and dysfunctional, all of which will have disastrous consequences. Temunovic warns that under such circumstances, religious education in schools hardly achieves any objective, and that more is lost by the fact that attendance of the parish catechism has decreased, especially among the Catholics, whose rate of attendance used to be very high. Tadej Vojnovic, professor at the Catechist – Theological Institute of the Subotica Catholic Bishopric, expressed similar remarks, fearing that religious education in schools would suffer the fate of Marxism, a formerly mandatory school subject that the students deemed boring and hateful, considering that it had been introduced for political, and not religious reasons. He pledged that religious education remain within the church sphere, while the schools should teach the fundamental concepts of faith and about the main religions in the world. Branka Josimov, the pedagogue of the Subotica Grammar School and teacher of civic education, identifies the major problem of introducing two new subjects in the fact that the parents, students and all other interested parties had never been asked about it. Religious education was superimposed, in an

accord between the Church and the State. In her opinion, civic education was introduced only as an inevitable alternative, although there had been even fewer initiatives in that direction. Vesna Fila, Principal of the elementary school "Vladislav Ribnikar" in Belgrade, also thinks that the introduction of religious education was effectuated hastily, with no preparation for the students, their parents and the teaching staff, who, in general, had not participated in the debate. Models from other countries (Germany, Austria and Croatia) were transferred and applied, overlooking the specific circumstances in Serbia, although there had been suggestions for different solutions. Her school is particularly satisfied with their religious teacher, but she expressed doubts about the competence of religious teachers in other schools, which could have been avoided by appropriate training, as it was done in the case of civic education. According to Principal Vesna Fila, the recently published textbooks are also inadequate. She considers religious education essential, because it provides the groundwork and basic knowledge about the fundamentals of civilization, but warns that the main teachings of other religions should also be studied. A particularly problematic feature, in her opinion, is that not the slightest attempt was made by the state organs to conduct an evaluation of religious education in the schools.

The largest religious community that did not obtain the right to religious education in the schools, the Christian Adventist Church, issued instructions for parents to enroll their children in civic education and to continue sending them to religious education at their churches, where textbooks and trained teachers are available. This church had successfully organized religious education during the period of communism, because they believe the degree of tolerance was greater then. After the introduction of religious education, there has been mistrust among the children of those who have opted for civic education, although no drastic discrimination or incident has been recorded.

The syllabi and textbooks

The religious education syllabi was delayed, because the religious communities had submitted them in various forms and therefore, their processing and standardization was a lengthy process. In view of the fact that the selection of textbooks and religious teachers rests upon the religious communities, the only remaining job for the Ministry of Education is to approve of them and prepare them for publication. None of the officials of the Ministry of Education is an expert in the area of religious education; therefore it is not competent to analyze the respective syllabi. An illustration of the (absence of) participation of the Ministry of Education in this process is the statement made by a district official in charge of this Ministry, who said that the Ministry of Religions, in cooperation with the community bishopric, had exclusive authority in the area of religious education.

According to Dimitrije Dimitrijevic, editor for religious education in the Institute for textbooks and teaching materials, the publication of all these textbooks was delayed. The Orthodox Catechism for the first grade has been published, whereas the one for the second year came out nearly one year late. The textbooks were late because of the decision that new textbooks should be produced and that each of them should be examined by the representatives of the other religious communities, in order to avoid contents that could provoke religious intolerance. This was a remarkable move forward compared to the situation in Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In contrast to the situation regarding other subjects, in the case of religious education, the Institute for textbooks functions exclusively as a technical service, and has no editorial authority whatsoever, not even regarding the illustrations and technical features, in spite of the fact that it covers all the publishing costs. As it was agreed that the Institute should effectuate the proofreading, the Institute considered that the translation of the textbook for the

Islamic community was bad, unintelligible, with non-standard language terms. The Islamic community, in turn, published the textbook for the second grade of elementary school independently, which was against the law. The Islamic religious teachers in Sandžak have also been using the textbook for Islamic religious education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, ignoring the existing legal barriers. The textbooks for Orthodox religious education are translated into Romany, although it is not known where they are being used, what their circulation is and whether they have been translated into the corresponding dialect. The textbooks for Catholic religious education, written in Croatian, are also published in Hungarian, Ruthenian and Ukrainian. Once again, it has not been established which respective schools use the Ruthenian and Ukrainian translations, nor whether there had been a need for the duplication of translations, circulations and printing, since the same ethnic community is in question. Other (Protestant) denominations have not submitted any textbooks at all, so the classes are either conducted without them, or by using textbooks that have not been approved and printed by the Institute.

It is obvious that the Board for Religious Education is trying, through its activities, to create the image of seriousness and importance of religious education within the educational system. However, there are two weak points to this strategy. The first is the typical and widespread belief that textbooks are the most important, if not the only, element of teaching. By concentrating energy and attention on textbooks, activities such as teacher training, teacher's manuals, seminars, working with parents and the teaching staff have been neglected. The second weak point is that the hastily prepared textbooks often contain flaws, the gravest of them being their discrepancy with the students' cognitive abilities and their educational and age level. Virtually all the religious teachers are unanimous on this point. Furthermore, as a rule, the religious teachers do not adhere to the prescribed curriculum and plan, which they also consider to be too comprehensive and unsuitable for the age of the children and their previous knowledge. Many SPC religious teachers are critical of the fact that one person is, practically, in charge of the curriculum and syllabi, and is also the author of the textbook. Particular lessons are very difficult to understand, because they refer to ongoing ideological disputes. Also, there is no difference between the textbooks for grammar schools and three-year vocational school, in spite of the fact that there are enormous differences in the students' previous knowledge and interest. There have been remarks that the religious education textbooks that have come out so far do not relate to the contents of other school subjects and that no particular attention is paid to the students' life experience and their everyday reality. Furthermore, in the course of the preparation of the curricula and syllabi and of the few existing textbooks, the parents' and students' reasons and motives for opting for this subject that are contained in several research studies conducted so far, were not taken into consideration.

Religious teachers

Another problem, which is more serious than the lack of textbooks or the delays in their publishing, is that there exist no other teaching resources, as for civic education, which abounds in teachers' manuals and supplementary materials. Thus, the religious teachers have to rely exclusively on their personal resources, creativity and initiative. It is difficult to expect all that from religious teachers, bearing in mind how unprepared and insufficiently trained are the majority of the teaching staff. Religious teachers themselves admit that they lack training and education for the implementation of the prescribed curriculum, that they are not familiar with the principles of preparing lessons and presentation of the teaching material and that they often find themselves torn between fulfilling curriculum objectives and wider educational tasks expected of

them. They alone have to cope with the selection of the teaching methods and procedures, and the lack of teaching equipment and materials.

The regulations concerning the mandatory education level requirements for religious teachers cannot be practically upheld in a greater part of Serbia. In the Vranje SPC bishopric, for example, only four or five individuals have such qualifications. The situation is similar in the Niš, Mileševo, Timok, Raška-Prizren and other SPC bishoprics. According to a priest of the Subotica Catholic bishopric, merely 10% of the religious teachers possess the required qualifications, whereas the others have undergone supplementary instruction, with no training in pedagogy and didactics, with the criteria for selection being, according to the church figures, loyalty to the Church and reverence.

Although the Ministry of Education and the joint Board for Religious Education had insisted on the organization of seminars for further training of the religious teachers, exchange of experiences and, above all, introducing them to the pedagogic and didactic approaches to education, this initiative was not carried out in practice, i.e., it was left to the individual religious communities and SPC bishoprics. The religious teachers exclusively have not been given the accredited catalogues for teacher professional training, published by the Ministry of Education and Sport, in spite of their lack of knowledge and experience in methodology and classical methods of conducting classes. The professional promotion of religious teachers has not been specified in the project for the reform of the educational system. In Austria, where SPC has been implementing Orthodox education for ten years already, financed by the Austrian Ministry for Education and Culture, seminars for Orthodox religious teachers are organized on a regular basis, addressing didactic topics and methods of inter-cultural and inter-religious teaching. In Serbia, even in the largest and richest Orthodox bishoprics such as the one of Banat, only annual meetings of religious teachers are held with no supplementary training or seminars ever organized. Nor have there been any meetings on the inter-confessional level among the religious teachers, although practically all the religious communities that are legally entitled to religious education are active in the territory of Banat. It seems that an exception to this rule was made in Novi Sad, on March 1, 2003, when a meeting of religious education teachers of the Orthodox bishopric of Backa and the Catholic bishopric of Subotica took place organized by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religion. Among the Orthodox bishoprics, Belgrade and Branicevo took initiative in organizing seminars for their religious teachers. One of the attendants of the seminar, a religious teacher from the Belgrade Orthodox bishopric, pointed out that the seminars helped him realize that children's attention cannot last longer than a quarter of an hour, and that he has to conceive versatile activities in order to maintain their attention throughout the class. Other religious teachers complained that at seminars, they were usually lectured ex-cathedra, whereas less attention is being paid to indispensable methodical skills, psychology and pedagogy. At the seminar in Novi Sad, it was proposed that religious teachers also be organized on the territorial, and not the confessional level, so that they could resolve common problems with concerted efforts.

The prevailing opinion in educational circles is that the definition of the qualification requirements of the religious teachers should comprise a pedagogic dimension, complementary to the theological expertise, which would make them as close as possible to the qualifications of other teachers. They think that the religious teachers should take into consideration developments in educational sciences (pedagogy, didactics and psychology) as well as the parents' expectations and the general atmosphere in the school and the social environment it is effectuated in. Without an analysis of the concrete situation and the students' educational and

developmental needs, the religious teachers are left to rely on their intuition, to adapt to the situation depending on their personal resources and to improvise.

Another unsolved issue concerning the status of religious teachers is the validation of foreign diplomas, obtained in schools and institutions that do not exist in our educational system. Furthermore, nothing is being done concerning the issue of integration of the educational institutions of the religious communities in Serbia that prepare future religious teachers. Only three large religious communities (Orthodox, Catholic and Islamic) have recently set up religious pedagogic schools, with the aim to train religious teachers, although the entire area of religious pedagogy remains underdeveloped in comparison with Bulgaria, for example, where there exist more than 100 various reference books covering this area. Other religious communities that have been given the right to implement religious education in the schools do not have any religious schools in Serbia.

There have been complaints in many schools that the religious communities fail to appoint religious teachers in a timely manner at the beginning of the school year. The law and the teachers' manuals do not provide for competitions or any other customary school activities in the sphere of religious education. The religious teachers generally take part only in the organization of the celebration of Saint Sava Day. Their integration into the working environment is further hampered by the fact that, due to the small number of lessons of religious education, they usually teach in several schools and have no possibility for becoming acquainted with the other teachers and establishing links with them. The school principals and pedagogues practically never visit religious education classes, under the pretext of non-interference with the autonomy of religious education. Few are the schools where the teachers of civic education and the religious teacher mutually visit each other's classes, although this could have beneficial effects in the exchange of experiences, the decreasing of tensions between the two subjects and on the motivation of the students.

The Belgrade Orthodox Bishopric, which has established a special office that coordinates all activities related to religious education in the schools, sets a positive example. The Belgrade Orthodox Bishopric has a supervisory board, publishes supplementary materials for teachers, and has so far organized several seminars, while all the Belgrade religious teachers meet on a regular basis with the coordinator for religious education, who has no other duties apart from this one. There are 103 religious teachers in Belgrade, 85 of whom are lay. Women account for more than half of them. The board for the selection of religious teachers in Belgrade mainly employed young religious teachers who had recently graduated from the Faculty of Theology or the Institute for Catechism of SPC, deploying them according to their wish or place of residence, even in the schools they used to attend and whose teaching staff they are familiar with. Their experience is that the young religious teachers are full of enthusiasm at the beginning of their working careers.

On the other hand, in rural areas and in small towns, priests usually perform religious education. The SPC laic religious teachers themselves consider that the priests involved in teaching do not possess a suitable pedagogic and professional expertise and that they are overwhelmed by other obligations. They emphasize that the religious education ought to be taught by lay teachers who have recently graduated from the Faculty of Theology, after it had been reformed and substituted the old juridical principles by interpretations of the holy fathers that have been translated into the Serbian language (the contemporary patristic theology). If the religious teacher has other obligations in the religious community, apart from teaching, then he or she is only a visitor in the school. That is why the prevalent opinion in many schools is that the religious teacher should not

have other obligations if the set objectives are to be achieved and the number of interested students maintained. The priests' numerous obligations in their parish brings into question the purpose and the feasibility of their parallel activities as religious teachers, so that their absence from classes in the rural areas is rather customary. In Užice, the priest who was appointed to teach religious education was later assigned his parish and stopped coming to classes, whereas the newly appointed teacher never showed up. The complaints of some schools in the Niš Orthodox bishopric were forwarded both to the respective department in the Ministry of Education and to the bishopric, but the problems still remain. The religious communities themselves do not insist on the priority of teaching. Thus, during my visit to Novi Pazar, practically all the teachers of the Islamic religious community were absent because they were attending the traditional funeral service for the former president of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegovic. Religious communities often change their religious teacher, which also provokes negative reactions among the students and the school teaching staff, because the interest for religious education is declining and the continuity of the teaching process is lost. In many schools, classes are not held regularly, but once a fortnight or even more seldom.

The Vranje Orthodox bishopric removed from the list of religious teachers deacon Vladimir Savic, after he had testified in court against the bishop of Vranje, Pahomije, who was charged with pedophilia. This deacon, who graduated from Theology two years ago, used to teach in the Economic and Chemical school in Vranje. As a substitute, the Bishopric appointed a pensioner, which is against the law. A similar thing occurred in the Economic school in Niš, where, according to the school pedagogue, a handsome, intelligent and young religious teacher who had begun teaching and had attracted many students was replaced by an elderly city priest whose classes only three students continued to attend, while the staff felt cheated, because no one had consulted them. The schools express their discontent because the Ministry of Education merely approves the list of religious teachers proposed by the religious communities. According to this principle, the religious communities assign religious teachers from the list to a particular school; while the schools' only duty is to make sure that the deployed candidates meet the legal requirements for working in the school. The schools estimate that such regulations put them in an utterly inferior position, let alone the fact that legal acts do not provide for the possibility of complaint or legal remedies for the protection of the religious teacher.

In the Orthodox and Catholic churches, additional tensions are present between the lay teachers and the clerics. The Catholic Church even imported several priests to Subotica, in order to occupy teaching posts there. It is a widespread opinion among the priests of both confessions that the lay teachers should not teach religious education disputing their competence for the job. Clerics secure the better posts in urban secondary schools for themselves, while deploying the lay, usually female, teachers in elementary schools. This practice is most evident in the Islamic religious community. On the other hand, the vast majority of the students, parents, and teachers think that it is possible to establish better contacts with lay teachers.

Opting for religious education and its accessibility

Many objections are being made in the schools regarding the way in which the students opt for and enroll in religious education. The teachers are at a loss concerning what to do with particular cases of students who are of different confession. The leaflet prepared by the Board for Religious Education for the purpose of selection between the two subjects is not detailed enough and does not provide sufficient information for making a choice. This year, leaflets were not distributed in Novi Pazar, so the selection was made in schools according to the confession to which students belong. Biljana Dimitrijevic, principal of the Third Belgrade Grammar School, thinks that the

students are unprepared for the selection between the two alternative subjects. They often opt for one of them out of spite against their parents and change subjects during the school year. According to her, the students in her school were generally guided by the information obtained through the media or by word of mouth from their peers. Religious teachers admit that it is difficult to opt for an unfamiliar subject; the parents are not given enough information and they also find it difficult to make a choice. Secondary students are not eager to study either of the subjects, pointing out that both of them are boring.

The percentages of students opting for religious education vary. Vojislav Milovanovic, Minister of Religions, declared that in the first year, 50% of elementary school students and 20% of secondary school students opted for religious education, although it was not organized for all of them, due to technical, personnel and other problems. Independent analyses reported the figures of 36.2% and 39% respectively for the parents of secondary school students. In the second year, according to the figures issued by the Ministry of Education, approximately 49% of first year elementary school students opted for religious education, whereas there was no data for secondary schools. The highest rate was marked in the region of Raška / Sanžak, primarily among the children of Islamic confession, fluctuating between 80% and 100%. This was followed by western and central Serbian regions, Belgrade and Vojvodina are in between, while the lowest interest was recorded in southern and eastern Serbia. According to this data, an average of 50% of the students in Serbia opt for religious education, which is still far below the average figures recorded in our neighboring countries, with which we share a common past. According to the percentages of students who opted for religious education in Serbia, the rural schools have the lead, although there are exceptions. In the area of Vranje, the interest for both religious education and civic education was remarkably low, while the numerous local Romany population did not opt for religious education.

In many areas, religious education has not been organized in the rural annexes of schools, such as in eight annexed classes of the school Sveti Sava in Pirot. None of the school authorities attempted to solve the problem of the rural children and non-existent classes. The church authorities say that they respected the minimum number of ten children per class and therefore did not organize religious education classes in the villages. The situation is similar in the majority of rural areas. The problem in the rural annexes of the local schools is that they often have only one classroom, which has to be divided because of the two alternative subjects. The situation in Novi Pazar is even worse, with the schools working in three shifts because of the notorious lack of space, so that the introduction of new subjects and the division on confessional basis create enormous practical problems.

The Religious Education Board decided in principle that religious education should be organized even when the number of children is below the legal minimum, yet this decision is being implemented with great difficulty. Due to technical problems and the lack of eligible teachers, small religious communities, as well as large religious communities, when they represent a minority, are not in a position to organize religious education. Therefore, smaller religious communities that do not have the possibility, capacity or personnel to organize religious education fear that they will be subject to indirect discrimination. The poor organization and the poverty of the Muslim (predominantly Romany) population in areas outside Sadžak is the reason why the Islamic religious community is unable to organize religious education in southern Serbia or in Vojvodina. The Slovakian Evangelical Church does not implement religious education in many places inhabited by its adherents, not even in the large habitation of Kovacica. The children of minority confessions attend civic education classes or in some cases attend Orthodox

religious education, because their parents do not want to separate them from their peers. In Sombor, they combine all the children from different schools who wish to attend Catholic religious education, but under such circumstances, it is difficult to keep an accurate record of the students and their attendance. In all the secondary schools in Subotica, The Reformed Church can gather only one class of students interested in religious education. In Belgrade, Niš, Smederevo and many other places, a student of Catholic or Islamic religion can be found in every class, but there is no religious education for these denominations.

Obviously, the sheer figures and data regarding the implementation of religious education are not and should not be the only criteria for its evaluation. The religious teachers see as the biggest problem the students' absences and lack of motivation. In the Pirot Grammar School, 30 students opted for religious teachers, but 80% of them never showed up to class. The decrease of interest among students is accounted for by incongruous timetables, excessive workloads and low motivation for a subject that is not graded numerically. The religious teachers see the lack of textbooks, appropriate space and work schedules as a discouraging factor. The students often transfer from one optional subject to the other, especially if they come up against problems in one of them. The religious communities themselves contributed to the scattering of students by their tardiness in appointing religious teachers. In several vocational schools in Niš and Belgrade (The Mechanical Engineering School, The Economic High School and The School for Hotel Management and Catering) that I visited, the students are particularly unmotivated and undisciplined. Asked why they had enrolled in religious education at all, if they have no interest in or motivation for this subject, they responded that it was because they were Serbs.

There are also different examples. In Vrcin, in the elementary school "Miroslav Jovanovic Cerovac", religious education was introduced in all classes at the principal's initiative, with 80% of the students in attendance, whereas all the parents of the first-graders opted for religious education, so that civic education was not introduced at all. The prevailing opinion in this school is that religious education has a positive impact both on the students' behavior and the teaching staff, while the parents have nothing but praise for it. Whether out of genuine desire, or in order to avoid having their children stick out as different, Muslim parents also opted for Orthodox religious education. The principal is opposed to the introduction of the alternative subject of civic education because the existence of this subject implies that the students who attend religious education have no civic education. Religious teacher I.K. conducts classes based on a plan that he prepares himself. He gives the students numerical marks in pencil, because he feels that they encourage motivation and responsibility in the children, but when it comes to final grades, he observes the rules and assesses their knowledge descriptively. He thinks that religious teachers have to understand that this is a school subject like all others and to behave accordingly – to keep strict attendance records and thus raise the student's awareness of the relevance of the choice they have made.

Rivalry between the two subjects and conflicts in the school

The gravest structural problem of the current teaching scheme for religious education and civic education is that they have been conceived as alternative subjects, although their contents, tasks and objectives do not present alternatives. In this sense, the provision concerning the obligatory choice between religious education and civic education has no educational, but an exclusively political basis. Because of these compulsory alternatives, the proponents of both options see the other subject as competition. In a situation where the number of schoolchildren is decreasing every year due to demographic reasons, the teachers are facing the possibility of losing their jobs. This is the reason why some of them are undergoing professional training for the newly

introduced subject of civic education and manifest resentment against religious education, which is being introduced into the schools as an additional subject that requires new teaching staff. There are similar fears on the other side, also. Often, such negative attitudes, which are present among the teachers of both subjects, result in a fierce competition for students and their parents' approval of their subject. Another cause of the existing rivalry between the two subjects is the insurmountable antagonism between SPC and the Ministry of Education. The prevailing attitude in SPC is that the state should only support, i.e. finance, the implementation of religious education, whereas the Church should make independent decisions regarding all other segments. Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina are cited as examples, where the results of religious education, according to Archbishop Lavrentije, are encouraging and pleasing. On the other hand, the author's modest insight into the problems related to the implementation of religious education in Serbia coincides with the above-mentioned critical attitudes about the implementation of religious education in Republika Srpska, whose experience, unfortunately, was not taken into consideration. The most serious objection of the SPC concerning the implementation of religious education is that the choice between religious education and civic education is made at the beginning of each school year and not for all the eight or four years of school at once. Some schools have received objections because the students and their parents are supposed to make their decision in the presence of the school pedagogue, without the religious teacher. Another manifestation of the inequality of the subjects is the fact that schoolmasters (or schoolmistresses) often teach civic education, so the students tend to opt for it more often. Although the problems have now become less frequent, the religious teachers' complaints are still present, concerning the timetables in some schools, where religious teaching is scheduled as the seventh class, or as an early morning class, and thus given marginal status. The response to religious education in schools is particularly problematic in the south of Serbia. In many communities, the teaching staff resent the religious teachers, who, in turn, avoid entering the teachers' room. The religious teachers are not invited to attend teachers' meetings. In many schools there have been objections because religious teachers come to classes wearing their robes.

On the other hand, during a lecture on sects that was given by a local priest, at the invitation of one of the schools, a scandal broke out when he mentioned civic education as one of the existing sects. The Niš Orthodox bishopric circulated 50,000 copies of a leaflet (published by the Lipovac Monastery), which also depicts civic education as a sect. The Holy Synod of Orthodox bishops, also, refer to the "so-called civic education". The Minister of Education and educational experts are accused of undermining the spiritual and moral values of the people, whereas modern education is defined as "perfidious brain-washing". The religious teachers of the Raška and Prizren bishopric and the Islamic community in Sandžak used to tell the students that those who opted for religious education could not attend civic education classes. In one school in Belgrade, the religious teacher established very good cooperation with the civic education teacher, who instructed him about teaching methodology and methods for coping with other practical problems, so he decided to acquire some further training at the seminars that she was attending. However, he was advised by SPC not to attend the seminars for civic education teachers, because they are harmful. Some religious teachers do not record their classes in the school register, justifying this by their ignorance in practical school matters, which poses a serious problem to the school administration. At the same time, they blame the school authorities if the children fail to enroll for their subject. In the schools around Niš, religious teachers refuse to participate in any extra-curriculum activities; they do not cooperate with the teaching staff and do not allow

any visits of their lessons. The priest in the village of Mramorak threatened the parents that he would not bless water if they did not opt for religious education for their children.

The implementation of religious teaching in the schools is also related to the display of religious symbols and the performing of religious practices, which has become common in many schools in Serbia and a cause of suspicion, especially in multi-confessional environments. In Novi Pazar, principals do not approve of schoolmistresses wearing veils at work. However, the Supreme Court of Serbia ruled that this was a breach of their civil rights and ordered the school in Novi Pazar that had suspended a female teacher from work to reinstate her to her teaching position.

During this research, contrary to some widespread expectations, I did not obtain any indication that the introduction of religious education in multinational communities in Vojvodina and Sandžak had led to any recorded serious problems or inter-confessional disputes. On the other hand, the curricula proscribe that three or four classroom periods per school year be dedicated to acquainting the students with the teachings and beliefs of other religious communities, but this is not observed in practice. Furthermore, the existing textbooks do not contain this type of information, and in general the religious teachers did not study this during their professional training, therefore they feel incompetent to teach things they themselves are not very familiar with. Nevertheless, some positive examples were recorded, such as in Prijepoljska Župa, when the Orthodox religious teacher conducted the class, substituting for the absent Islamic religious teacher.

Although the debate that had been going on in the press prior to the introduction of religious education had predicted possible conflicts among the students, it seems that they take no heed of it. The parents' engagement and interest is even weaker, their attitude toward this subject being quite indifferent, which is also true of the other subjects. The parents we talked to say that they have decided to enroll their children in religious education because they wanted them to know something about their "roots" or national tradition. Generally, these are not practicing believers, but people who wish their children to be "properly" brought up, to be informed about "their" or "the Serbian" religion, or even, who deem that "religious education cannot do them any harm".

Reopening the question of the status of religious education

During my research, the Ministry of Education of Serbia prepared a new Law on elementary and secondary education that reflected the strategy of the educational reforms promoted by this Ministry, which also comprised the alteration of the status of religious education. The students ought to be given the possibility to choose among at least four alternative subjects, two of which would be religious education and civic education, whereas the others would be offered by the schools, depending on their possibilities. Subjects such as computer training, creative writing, environmental education, a second foreign language, etc. were suggested. According to this model, the students would choose two optional subjects, which would not have to be either religious education or civic education. All the religious teachers and SPC clergy I spoke to fiercely criticized such a model, fearing that the parents would, in that case, opt for other, "more useful" subjects. In its announcement, SPC brought accusations against the Ministry of Education, claiming that the educational reform was not beneficial for society and that it strove "to create a post-modern child, a sort of a clone, which is a crime over education and spirituality that should be incriminated." The Holy Synod of Orthodox bishops sent a written demand to the Assembly of Serbia that the draft Law be immediately withdrawn. Simultaneously, the citizens' association *Forum iuris* from Novi Sad addressed a petition to the Constitutional Court of Serbia seeking the reconsideration of the constitutionality of the introduction of religious education in state schools, pointing out that it represented a breach of the constitutional principles of

separation of the church from the state, the equality of the citizens and the equal status of religious communities.

One day after the announcement of this news, the Patriarch of SPC and the other members of the Holy Synod met with the Minister of Education and afterwards, Minister Knežević lent his support to the existing model of religious education in state schools. According to this accord, the mandatory alternatives of religious education and civic education will not be affected by the introduction of optional subjects in the course of the educational reform. In return, the representatives of the religious communities backed the reform. In their joint statement, they upheld the agreement that the late Prime Minister Zoran Đindić had reached with the representatives of the religious communities, reiterating that religious education had resulted from a political accord. On the same day, Minister Milovanović held a press conference, questioning the petition submitted by *Forum iuris* and relying on the 2002 census, in which 95% of the citizens of Serbia declared themselves as believers, with only 0.5% as atheists and 4.5% undecided or undeclared. These results were interpreted as a clear signal to the state to respect the religious rights of its citizens.

The Constitutional Court of Serbia had the last word about religious education in early November 2003, when it ruled that the legal regulations according to which religious education and its alternative subject had been introduced into the school complied with the Constitution, thus rejecting the demands contained in the petition of *Forum iuris*. As the spokesman of the Court, Judge Ljubomir Popović, explained, the supporting arguments for this decision were that the program of religious education was approved by both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religions, upon previous consultation with the religious communities, that the students were not forced to attend religious education classes since they were given the freedom of choice between religious education and civic education, which protected the students' and their parents' right not to declare their religious affiliation and that the grades in this subject were descriptive and did not affect the students' final score. Slobodan Vucetić, President of the Constitutional Court, sustained Judge Popović's opinion that the legal acts contained no incongruence with the Constitution, but he remarked that the curricula, particularly the one for Orthodox catechism, contained some regulations that might be unconstitutional. The statement of both judges remained incomplete. The position of Judge Popović on the participation of the Ministry of Education in the approval of the program of religious education is in contradiction with the findings of this research and does not guarantee the principle of separation of the church and the state. Furthermore, the existence of only one alternative subject and the previously described situation in some multi-confessional communities, does not allow for the definition of religious education as a free choice. The second round of decisions concerning religious education took place during the summer and remained, generally, beyond the reach, participation, and interest of the public.

Professor Sima Avramović from the Belgrade Law Faculty, one of the creators of the legal draft for religious education, explained his arguments, and, indirectly, the arguments of the Serbian government for the introduction of religious education. Avramović insists on the fact that this is an issue of returning, and not introducing religious education into the legal system and draws a comparison with the process of denationalization of assets, pledging for the restitution property rights to expropriated assets after World War Two. This type of argumentation overlooks the historical perspective and changes that have taken place in the meantime. The situation is similar with religious education. The forcible and undemocratic abolition of religious education by the communist authorities after World War Two does not mean that that it should be reinstated in the

form it used to have fifty years ago, i.e. that exclusively the religious communities that conducted it at that time should effectuate this.

Unfortunately, not even the debate on *the right of the parents to educate their children in accordance with their religious and philosophical beliefs*, which is an integral part of many human rights conventions, which was initiated by the introduction of religious education, brought about appropriate interpretations. While its opponents focused on negative aspects of the protection of this right, that is, on the parents' right to protect their children from ideological indoctrination in educational institutions, Avramovic and other supporters emphasized its positive aspect, the fact that the parents, as taxpayers, should enjoy the right for their children to receive an education in accordance with their religious and philosophical convictions. This is the reason why it would be more appropriate to re-examine the procedure according to which religious education was introduced, instead of insisting on the issues of constitutionality, statutory matters, and the compliance of religious education with international conventions. Rejecting the possibility of the violation of *the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and confession*, professor Avramovic invokes legal regulations that authorize the Ministry of Education to select educational counselors for religious education and to sanction the textbooks and define the list of teachers. However, this research has shown that these regulations are not being implemented in practice, or that they are rubber-stamped, which means that the authorized state agencies renounce their right to control religious education, including the possibility to prevent the violation of the children's rights.

The last argument in favor of the current religious education scheme in Serbia that professor Avramovic put forward is that it entirely conforms to the existing international legal regulations, i.e. that domestic legislation is on the right track to be harmonized with the legal systems of other European countries. Such a comparison does not take into consideration the numerous changes that have taken place in religious education over the past few decades, primarily as a consequence of the growing confessional and cultural pluralism, the danger of marginalizing religious education in the contemporary world and the changed relations between the state and the religious communities. The fundamental change of the theological paradigm that ensued following the departure from the authoritative method of education in favor of educational methods conforming to the children's interests and needs, also influenced the alteration of the character of religious education in many European countries. Only the main trends are mentioned here, which are also reflected in the legal amendments adopted in Scotland in 1980 and in England and Wales in 1988, as well as in the ongoing debates in France following the Foulard affair (the ban on veils) and in Germany after its unification.

In many countries, students are no longer separated on confessional basis, while their religious teachers are no longer educated in religious schools, but rather at special departments for the study of religion that have been established at numerous universities. In Great Britain and in Scandinavian countries, offering the students balanced and critical knowledge of religion, indispensable for understanding their religious heritage and past, as well as the challenges of the present and preparing them for the future, by introducing to them the different religious systems, is considered to be one of the tasks and responsibilities of the secular state. Getting to know other religions from the confessional perspective is no longer considered to be sufficient. By carefully altering the objectives and contents of religious and moral education, the educational authorities in Great Britain and Scandinavia refuse to be carried away by the principles of relativistic indifference toward religion or to yield to parents and religious communities the choice to educate children in specific religions. On the contrary, their educational perspective is such of a

spiritual development of the children that will enable them to assume a creative attitude toward the complex reality of the third millennium. For the same reasons France, the bastion of secular education, has recently begun to introduce religious studies into secondary schools.

In Germany, except for the state of Brandenburg, the concept of "religious education" with a curriculum that would be entirely the responsibility of the state, i.e. conceived by the state educational agencies, has not been accepted. Nevertheless, ever since the mid-seventies, confessional religious education in Germany has been undergoing changes. The Catholic and the Evangelical Church have conceived curricula aiming not only at introducing the students to their traditional heritage, but also to help them understand other religious beliefs and prepare them for dialogue and the development of their own independent views regarding their own religious orientation. Several states have launched religious education of the Orthodox Church (in Nordrhein-Westfalen, for example) and also, recently, pilot programs of religious education for Muslim students. The delay in the organization of religious education for the members of other religious communities in Germany is caused by the imperative requirement of educational institutions that the teachers of religious education should be experts with a diploma from a German (pedagogic) institution. Furthermore, the religious communities must fulfill the requirement of permanence and unity in order to be accepted as equal partners of the state, whose religious authorities examine and license their curricula.

Conclusions and recommendations

The most problematic issues that became apparent in the course of this research are the (lack of) integration of religious education into the educational system of Serbia and the polarization and tensions that are present in many schools between religious education and civic education. The reason for adverse reactions to religious education lies in the procedure of its introduction which was seen as a tacit accord between SPC and one or more political parties, i.e. their leaders. Furthermore, after two years of implementation, and a host of legal and judicial decisions, religious education in Serbia continues to lag behind the existing standards in other countries, whose examples are often invoked as a justifying argument for its introduction. At the same time, numerous aspects of the teaching process and the resolution of all arising problems are left to the Religious Education Board, an institution that functions outside the educational system and therefore lacks legitimacy.

Religious education in public schools ought to be given special status because it differs from church catechism both from the organizational point of view and regarding its content. Even if the confessional model is retained, its implementation requires close cooperation of the religious communities with the educational authorities in all organizational and substantial matters, concerning the curricula, methods, textbooks, supervision and accountability of both parties for the teaching process. The state, i.e. the Ministry of Education, must be responsible for the professional training and professional development of religious teachers and for the appointment of qualified experts who will be directly responsible for the articulation and resolution of all the problems related to religious education, as is the case with the other subjects. The integration of religious education also comprises a precisely defined system for the validation of diplomas of religious studies acquired abroad, with an emphasis on pedagogic qualifications. In order to improve the effectiveness of the teaching process, the religious communities ought to introduce, or broaden, the pedagogical and didactic contents of their studies. In addition to this long-term measure, and due to the unequal means of the religious communities, it is necessary that the Ministry of Education undertake the responsibility for organizing professional seminars for religious teachers of all the religious communities aimed at enhancing their integration into the

educational system. As a start, it is imperative to organize regular encounters between religious teachers and the ministries, boards and school principals competent for dealing with specific problems, so that the seminars would not be encumbered by such issues. The current tendencies in educational reform is toward permanent education and professional training for teachers, as well as the announced possibility of professional promotion, which ought to apply to religious teachers equally. The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the schools, should examine and recommend other possibilities leading to the integration of religious teachers and religious education on the school level, from the option of assigning the religious teachers with class tutorship, to their participation in school celebrations, excursions, preparing exhibitions, etc. Numerous organizational issues and technical problems, which also make religious education a marginal subject, can be resolved only through the cooperation of educational structures and religious communities with openness, patience, mutual understanding and compromise, and not in such an atmosphere of mutual accusations that has been dominant so far, especially in the attitude of the religious communities toward the schools.

The present status of religious education and civic education makes it practically impossible for the students to study both subjects, although it is evident that these two subjects have different contents that can by no means represent alternatives. The main recommendation of the evaluation of civic education, not to impose the exclusive choice between these two subjects, has not been observed. As the prospects for a change of status of these two subjects are non-existent, a solution could be found in an attempt to increase the alternative dimensions of their contents as a way of eliminating rivalry. One of the possibilities for overcoming the current situation is to enter, at least in secondary schools, a non-confessional introduction of the world religions into the civic education curriculum. The main obstacle to the implementation of this concept is the lack of the teaching staff, as the existing educational institutions in Serbia do not train such profiles. The Ministry of Education should undertake measures to overcome this deficiency by forming new departments for the comparative study of religions, and could start with additional training for history, philosophy and sociology teachers.

It is necessary to introduce an institutional system of obtaining insight into the implementation of religious education for the students coming from small religious communities, which, at least in big cities, should not pose a problem. As for the implementation of religious education in small village schools and in annexes of local schools, it is necessary to establish alternative models for its functioning. In the case that religious education classes are not feasible due to numerous practical obstacles, the children in such schools should be offered specific forms of education such as excursions or summer camps, where abbreviated and specially adapted religious education, and also civic education programs, could be effectuated.

The Ministry of Education and the religious communities will have to solve the problem of the frequent absenteeism of the priests who teach religious education, who, due to their parochial obligations and the nature of their vocation, frequently cannot adhere to their teaching schedule, and which, in turn, directly affects the integration of religious education, its status in the schools, and the students' motivation. It is imperative to insure that the religious teachers appointed by the religious communities should not be frequently changed, except in cases of flagrant breach of discipline or professional incompetence. Also, it is important to require the schools to respect the fixed teaching schedules, both regarding the place and the time designated for religious education classes. Without full integration in the school educational system, religious education will not achieve full legitimacy, nor will it motivate the students for regular attendance.

The issue of assessment, in all its dimensions, is an important stimulus for the students and a way to control their work. Therefore, it is the teachers' duty to explain to their students the methods and forms of evaluation of their accomplishments. For the time being, the majority of religious teachers have opted for the easiest approach, that being to give their students the highest grade – outstanding. This issue should also be linked to the general approach to education and resolved in the same way as for the other subjects. Regardless of the selected approach (numerical or descriptive), it is important to ensure that it should clearly reflect the defined criteria that will involve both the objectives of religious education and the results of contemporary research of the grading systems. However, the problem is not reduced to the grading of the students, which is usually at issue, but also involves the evaluation of the teachers and all the creators and implementers of the curricula and syllabi. As in all other segments of education, in order to achieve a creative and quality supervision of religious education, it is necessary to establish cooperation between the educational authorities (the school, the educational and pedagogic institutions and the Ministry) and the religious communities. In the spirit of educational reform, in addition to the measures that are indispensable for upgrading religious education and achieving its integration into the educational system, it is also necessary to make the activities of the Religious Education Board, as well as all the instances involved in religious education, transparent and accessible to the public. The need to inform the public about the process of implementation of religious education is marked because of the very nature of this subject and because of the fact that its introduction gave rise to so much controversy and so many disputes. It is of particular importance to keep the parents and the school personnel permanently informed about the developments related to religious education.

The introduction and implementation of religious education in Serbia so far has been characterized by the principles that were subjected to criticism in the recent report of the "Comprehensive analysis of the elementary education system in FRY", conducted by UNICEF in collaboration with the ministries for education in Serbia and Montenegro. This report concluded that the decisions related to education had been made in a centralistic manner, had been applied regardless of the context and that the teaching process had been organized in an inflexible way. The corresponding educational documents concerning religious education predominantly contain intentions, desires, declarations and curricula, with no accompanying mechanisms and resources that would ensure their implementation. The students, their parents and religious teachers were not consulted when the objectives of religious education were being defined, whereas the curricula and syllabi are not harmonized with the existing curricula, let alone with the current reforms and the modernization of the school system. The educational reform in Serbia should not ignore the curricula and syllabi of the newly introduced subjects, nor should it disregard the development and experiences of religious education in other countries. Religious education in schools makes sense only if it is in correlation with the general educational curriculum, i.e., with the syllabi of the other subjects and their didactic and methodological apparatus. When invoking the conventions on human rights in upholding the right to religious education in schools, the religious communities in Serbia have to accept the fact that according to these conventions, the school must uphold democratic and pluralistic principles that imply tolerance and openness to the contents of different confessions, religions and different perspectives of the world. If it fails to observe the principles of educational reform and to aspire to an integration of its objectives, contents and methods in the teaching process, within the context of a pluralistic school, both in the world and on the domestic scene, religious education in Serbia will retain the status of a guest (or intruder, in the eyes of its opponents) in the school system.